

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001648

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09-23-13

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [CASC](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: Unprecedented unrest in the Maldives against
backdrop of election preparations

Refs: Colombo 1643, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Unrest hit the Maldives over the September 20-21 weekend, with rioting in Male', the capital. The unrest was apparently triggered by at least two deaths that occurred either before or during a prison riot at a jail located on a nearby island. Several buildings, primarily government offices, were torched in Male' and police used tear gas to quell the disturbance. This rioting comes against the backdrop of the just-launched Presidential selection process, and may indicate underlying political unrest. We have no reports of Amcits being injured in the disturbance.
END SUMMARY.

2. (C) The disturbance began on September 20 with the killing of two prison inmates either before or during an apparent small-scale riot on the tiny prison island of Maafushi, about 45 minutes away from the capital island of Male'. Rioting broke out in the capital on Saturday, September 21 when the casualties were sent to Male'. According to press reports, relatives of the dead began agitating near a cemetery where one of the casualties had been taken, which sparked wide-scale unrest. Several government buildings were torched, including the Elections Commission, High Court, and several police stations. The Majlis (Parliament) apparently suffered broken windows and other minor damage. The injured were sent by chartered aircraft from the Maldives to Colombo, reportedly to avoid further unrest. One additional inmate died on September 22. Out of the ten total casualties brought to Colombo, all the victims were convicts.

3. (C) The National Security Service (NSS) whose members perform both military and police duties, quelled the riot with rubber bullets and tear gas. A night curfew was announced on Saturday. Five NSS personnel have been arrested in connection with the initial prison deaths. President Gayoom expressed dismay at the rioters' actions, and blamed the weekend's unrest on "hardened criminals." Further, Gayoom stated that he would punish any NSS personnel connected to the initial deaths of prisoners that sparked the rioting, and announced an inquiry into the causes of the violence. Reports from the press and a visiting Mission team indicated that as of Monday (September 22) the situation was calm, although there was an increased security presence, with a few armored vehicles near the city center. An NSS official told the DATT September 23 that two NSS officers were injured in the prison fracas and several others in the riots in Male'.

4. (C) An Embassy FSN was in Male' at the time of the riots and witnessed a crowd of approximately 600 people throwing stones at the police initially sent to control the riots. The small police unit continued to suffer at the hands of the mob, with police posts and vehicles set on fire. Our FSN reported, from conversations with locals, that the general feeling was that years of oppressive rule had finally taken its toll.

5. (U) We have no reports of American citizens being affected by the weekend disturbances. Most tourists to the Maldives (which include about 5,000 U.S. citizens a year) go directly from the airport (on an island opposite Male') to one of the over eighty resort islands around the country without overnighing in Male' (although daytrips to Male' are a standard offering at most of the resorts.)

6. (C) COMMENT: These unprecedented riots were apparently triggered by mistreatment of prisoners but quickly mushroomed into a broader expression of discontent. Maldivian officials are quick to assert that the disturbances are not connected to the just-launched Presidential selection process, although we find it interesting that the Elections Commission was

one of the buildings put to the torch. It is too early to tell if this weekend's disturbances will affect tourism, a major pillar of the Maldivian economy. Our team returns from the Maldives September 24 and will provide a fuller report then. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD